

ART REVIEW

ART REVIEW; Where The Wild Things Are (Made By Hand)

By Grace Glueck

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Stirred by Adm. Richard E. Byrd's trips to Antarctica and the South Pole in the early 1930's, a stonemason and decoy maker named Charles Hart began obsessively turning out carved penguins. His creations range in height from one-inch paperweights to birds four feet tall.

The four-footers are life-size emperor penguins. And a pair of them carved in wood in 1935, which once flanked the doorway of a home in Essex, Mass., are now the chief attraction at RJG Antiques, one of 45 invited dealers at the American Antiques Show at the Metropolitan Pavilion through Sunday.

Full-bodied and wearing their black-and-white (painted) formal regalia, they join the many other creatures -- of wood, stone, cloth, paper and what have you -- that populate the show along with folk art staples like needlework, paintings, sculpture, furniture, pottery, jewelry, carpets, toys, rugs, decoys, weather vanes, Americana, political items and things harder to name.

The show, which opened with a preview benefit Wednesday night, is a fundraiser for the American Folk Art Museum, and the third such annual event under its sponsorship. It kicked off Americana week in New York, traditionally the time

for auctions of American art and a variety of other antiques shows. With a projected attendance of 10,000 and only a four-day run, this show may not be the biggest jamboree of the season, but in addition to the lure of its wares it has the appeal of intimacy.

There are many other engaging creatures on view besides penguins. At Trotta-Bono three tabletop-size pigs await adoption: a snouty, long-eared black-and-white spotted sow and her two matching offspring, a 20th-century carving by Felipe Archuleta of Santa Fe, N.M. At Heller Washam a robustly carved carousel canine, painted black with a vivid saddle blanket and known as "Running Dog," dates from 1895 to 1905 and is attributed to Charles Looff of Brooklyn.

Among the goodies at Stephen Score is a large-scale fish balanced on a ball, which once served as a weather vane atop a cannery. The Hill Gallery is showing a four-foot-tall carved plaster snow owl, attributed to Ulysses Ricco and made around 1920. This symbol of wisdom was the original model for the cast owls atop a library at the University of Rochester.

Speaking of owls, they shine at Raccoon Creek Antiques on an awesome wall that looks like a mini-theater set. An ensemble of avian doings, carved with a penknife in wood in the early 1900's by Noah Weiss of Lehigh County, Pa., it measures around nine square feet and reproduces in life size 31 birds of the Delaware Valley. Nesting, feeding and carousing in thickly carved leaves and foliage painted in earth tones, they are topped by a mother owl who peers down from the top of the wall at a separate tree trunk housing her mate and offspring. The installation is one of the more original items in a show not lacking in fresh stuff.

Most of what's here, of course, falls into more traditional categories; furniture, for example. Two kinds are on view: high-end pieces made by truly skilled craftsmen and more informal objects, ranging from rustic to endearingly primitive. One of the well-turned high-enders at H. L. Chalfant is a grain-painted

comb-back Windsor chair, circa 1800, made for a Dr. Enoch Hazard of Newport, R.I. Its salient feature is a hugely exaggerated writing arm, like one on an old schoolroom chair but more than twice the size. The thick, rounded arm contains no fewer than six drawers, which could hold a lot of pens and prescription pads.

On the more rustic side is a wonderfully fussy sculptural suite of white-painted Adirondack furniture -- a settee and three armchairs -- at the Cherry Gallery. Made in Maine or New Hampshire around 1910 of birch root burls that flare restlessly up over their backs and sides, the pieces have fanlike insets of birch twigs and are altogether a porch conversation starter.

Tramp art furniture, made of discarded materials by hobos and hobbyists, looms large at Clifford A. Wallach, where the star is a sideboard, one of the largest known tramp art pieces. Anonymously made around 1900, it is obsessively surfaced with intricate geometric elements, edged with uneven notching and topped by a small decorative fanlight motif in wood. While there, also check out the fine ornate keepsake box, whose surface is appliquéd with 170 hearts and inset with two round mirrors and a photograph, presumably of its original owner.

Also in the maverick furniture class is an amusing "Four Seasons Dressing Screen" at Allan Katz Americana. Made of carved and polychromed painted wood, circa 1925, each of its panels depicts a season of the year, shown in the different garments of four women, from fur coat to short-sleeved dress.

It wouldn't really be a folk art show without quilts, rugs and samplers, and they are here in abundance. Among the more dazzling quilts is a Mennonite cover of fine wool challis in a sharply geometric windmill-blade pattern at Stella Rubin. Made in Lancaster County, Pa., around 1870, its vibrant purples, blues and reds give it lots of movement.

Not to be overlooked is a wonderful appliquéd and embroidered 19th-century crazy quilt at Elliott & Grace Snyder Antiques, its entire surface paved with all manner of floral, animal and human images in separate irregular patches.

As for rugs, one of the prizes at Jan Whitlock is a fine early hearth rug, in a combination technique of shirring and yarn sewing. It depicts two cozy houses side by side within a border of floral vines. And samplers? The lock on them here is held by M. Finkel & Daughter, one of whose treasures is a brilliant example made in 1786 by Sally Pearce Olney, age 11, of Providence, R.I. Its fine stitchery limns birds, flowers, trees, local characters and a view of the Providence State House.

Portraits in painting and sculpture, ranging from crude to fairly finished, are also de rigueur for folk art shows, and while the examples here are not all that outstanding, several rank high. Among them is "Girl in a Pink Dress," a winsome likeness of a mature-looking child holding a religious book, attributed to Sturtevant Hamblin of Boston and dated circa 1845, at David Wheatcroft.

A long way from the relative finish of this portrait are two crude but arresting stoneware pieces at Fleisher-Ollman: a "Face Jug" from Alabama circa 1880, a whimsical rendition of a black man; and a "Merchant Jug," with advertising on the front, made by Javen Brown in North Carolina around 1930, a hair-raising likeness of the devil himself.

The museum has appended a small and rather anemic show of its own, "Lame Ducks and Other Political Animals: The Art of Politics." It mingles political items from dealers (for sale) with photographic blowups of patriotic and political objects from the museum's collection, along with a real whirligig showing Uncle Sam on a bicycle. It's worth a glance, but you will have more fun at the dealers' booths.